

Laurie Baker: England-born ‘native’ architect of India

Believed Mahatma Gandhi Was Country’s Greatest Architectural Teacher

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Twenty years ago Laurie Baker received a call from the Queen’s office in London to inquire whether he would accept the OBE if it were to be conferred on him. At the time, after a long awaited and frustrated bid for Indian citizenship, Baker replied that he would be grateful if Buckingham Palace could help him become an Indian citizen instead.

The short telephone exchange was typical of a man who spoke little; but when he did, it was his own mind. In a profession where architects perpetually seek international recognition and professional awards, Baker lived and worked alone and entirely without recognition or reward. In his adopted home state of Kerala, he built over two thousand houses, besides a number of institutes, fishing villages, mission buildings, schools, and cathedrals. With a body of work that rivals any contemporary Indian or foreign practice, no one—least of all the ministry of external affairs — could ever doubt his status as an England-born native son of India. Baker eventually received his Indian citizenship, and with the threat of an OBE looming large, the government of India also hastily dumped a Padmashree on him.

Baker’s most impressive achievement has doubtlessly been his ability to construct suitable buildings at low cost and so direct bureaucrats and politicians to the growing needs of the poor. The source for all his professional work always remained his own particular brand of Quaker humanism, which, more than any single structure, is his most significant legacy to architecture.

Baker always maintained that India’s greatest architectural teacher was neither Le Corbusier nor Sir Edwin Lutyens, but Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhiji spoke consistently, and with common sense about the building needs of our country, said Baker, referring to his statement that the ideal house in India will be built from materials found within a five-mile radius of it.

Such a lesson on appropriate technology Laurie Baker put into practice in virtually all the buildings he built in India. Rejecting values alien to the place, wasteful building practices and self-seeking ethics of the architectural profession, Baker devised his own architecture and his own morally satisfying way of practicing it. His singular ambition of a better building at half the cost made him eliminate useless members of the conventional architectural team just the way he eliminated unnecessary material from a building. Throughout the course of his 70-year practice, he stuck unfailingly to his ideals.

Though there is little doubt about the relevance of his work to Indian architecture, it is a strange irony of the profession that a truly identifiable Indian architecture should be created by an Englishman. Moreover, it is surprising that so little is known about a man who has single-handedly innovated low cost construction techniques in this country, questioned and radically altered the nature of conventional building technology and

architectural practice, and above all, one who has built and written so prodigiously. But recognition of his work by the government could hardly be expected.

I was fortunate to have experienced something of the integrity of Baker's life in the two years I spent recording his work. Over many meetings in the verandah of his home, and the numerous visits to his sites, watching him communicate with the Malayalee masons, I came to realize that Baker's architecture was not merely an expression of building needs, but something more — something that recognized ordinary people's aspirations for a better life. His buildings were an honest and direct response to the idea that originality meant going back to origins, to an understanding of a common way of living, to a life without style. But always one with natural surroundings.

Even the journey to Baker's house through the city is a symbolic return to the origins, a transformation to another architectural age; it takes the visitor from the denser concrete centre of Thiruvananthapuram, through the freshness and shade of the suburbs, to the relatively unspoilt outskirts of Nalanchira. The house is not visible from the road, and the walk up towards it is one of slow discovery —an entrance gate, a steeper gradient along a workshop to a free standing door, a curved path along the guest house and the final flight of steps to the main house. The house itself is oriented towards the countryside—away from the city — and so it renews its links to its Kerala ancestry. The visitor hardly ever notices the extent of the constructions, for the house has been fragmented to follow the contours, so that rooms rise with the land. Bits of the house, portico, study bedroom, dining and kitchen, all come together under the foliage of tropical trees and shrubs, blending into the background.

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